



The Development of China's Global South Diplomacy and Great Power Rivalry

YAMAGUCHI Shinji

Chapter 2

President Xi Jinping with leaders of participating countries at the military parade commemorating the 80th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan
(Photo: Xinhua/ABACA/Kyodo News Images)

The Indo-Pacific at a Crossroads

Abstract

Against the backdrop of intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, the Xi Jinping administration has placed significant emphasis on Global South diplomacy. This approach has its origins in the strategic debates around 2013 and in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and it forms part of China's strategy toward the United States: one aimed at gradually eroding the U.S.-led international order over the long term and reshaping it into one more favorable to China. Concretely, this diplomacy seeks to weaken the U.S.-led order by advancing initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI), extending partnership diplomacy globally, and expanding BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). While this diplomacy promotes bloc formation in international relations, it simultaneously accelerates a competitive pluralization in which Global South states maintain relations with both the United States and China.

1. Introduction

China has been intensifying its Global South diplomacy. Given China's longstanding self-conception, this may not seem particularly surprising. China has consistently identified itself as "the world's largest developing country" and has long positioned itself as a representative of the developing world that levels criticism at the developed countries.¹

Yet when one considers the actual priorities of Chinese foreign policy, the intensification of Global South diplomacy can be viewed as a significant shift. Since the era of Deng Xiaoping, the central axis of Chinese diplomacy has been great power diplomacy: relations with major powers have, arguably, received more attention than relations with developing countries. During the period of reform and opening-up under Deng's leadership, the foremost priority was securing the capital and technology required for economic development from abroad. To that end, while the rhetoric of being "the world's largest developing country" was maintained, diplomacy with developed countries and great powers took precedence in practice.² Now, however, the focus of Chinese diplomacy has shifted toward developing countries. This is not to say that China has come to neglect great power diplomacy. Nevertheless, the intensification of Global South diplomacy has measurably altered the relative balance of Chinese diplomacy.

Why, then, has China come to prioritize diplomacy with the Global South under Xi Jinping? How should we understand the origins and drivers of this shift? The aim of this chapter is not only to make sense of China's Global South diplomacy in its own right, but also to use it as a window onto the broader contours of China's foreign strategy in an age of great power competition shaped by intensifying U.S.-China rivalry.

This chapter argues that the intensification of China's Global South diplomacy is part of a strategy that reflects deepening rivalry among the great powers. Its origins can be traced to China's foreign policy debates around 2013 and the new diplomatic initiatives that followed. As U.S.-China rivalry has subsequently deepened, the importance of Global South policy

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- 1) Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Kida Shojiro, *Mo Takuto no Gaiko: Chugoku to Daisan Sekai* [Mao Zedong's Diplomacy: China and the Third World] (Tokyo: Horitsu Bunkasha, 1992).
 - 2) See, for example, "Di shi ci zhuwai shijie huiyi zai Beijing juxing Hu Jintao fabiao zhongyao jianghua" [10th Conference of Diplomatic Envoys Stationed Abroad Held in Beijing; Hu Jintao Delivers Important Speech], *People's Daily*, August 30, 2004.

has risen accordingly. This implies that China's Global South policy is best understood as a diplomatic effort to gradually erode the U.S.-led international order over the long term and reshape it into one more favorable to China. In that sense, China's Global South diplomacy must be situated in a somewhat different context from the diversification and pluralization of diplomacy that other chapters examine.

Earlier scholarship on China's Global South diplomacy leaves room for further examination, particularly with respect to its place within China's diplomatic strategy in great power competition.³ In his 2013 book, David Shambaugh argued that China's expansion of global influence had been limited and that, in this sense, China was a "partial power."⁴ However, Shambaugh focused mainly on China's global diplomacy in the 2000s, and what bears watching is the trajectory of China's diplomacy since then. Scholarship on China's partnership diplomacy as part of its alignment behavior has tended to dwell excessively on whether such partnerships constitute a form of military alliance, and has thus proved insufficient for analyzing China's Global South diplomacy, which itself emphasizes the principle of non-alignment.⁵ On China's grand strategy in the era of great power competition, there is the work of Rush Doshi, but his analysis does not concretely specify how the phase of seizing hegemony would manifest, and his treatment of Global South diplomacy within that phase remains underdeveloped.⁶ In light of these concerns, this chapter approaches its analysis primarily from the Chinese perspective, drawing chiefly on Chinese official documents, scholarly works produced in China, and media debates within the country.

A note on terminology is in order here. China has positioned itself as "the world's largest developing country" and has long defined itself as a representative of the developing world. When the term "Global South"

3) On China's Global South policy, see Yatsuzuka Masaaki, ed., *NIDS China Security Report 2025: The Rising Global South and China*, English edition (Tokyo: NIDS, 2025); Aoyama Rumi, "'Jineika' suru sekai to Chugoku no gurobaru sausu seisaku" ['Bloc Formation' in the World and China's Global South Policy], *Kokusai Mondai* [International Affairs], no. 711: 37-48; Dawn C. Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

4) David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5) Ketian Zhang, "Alliances with Chinese Characteristics? The Contents and Rationale of China's Strategic Partnerships," *International Politics*, June 2, 2025.

6) Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

began to gain wide international currency around 2022–2023, China was not using the term very actively.⁷ This appears to have stemmed from a perception that the term was a Western device aimed at dividing the developing world. Subsequently, however, China itself began identifying as a member of the Global South and adopting the term actively. This chapter refers to China's diplomacy toward emerging economies and developing countries as “Global South diplomacy,” even for the period when China itself was not using the term.

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 examines the development of China's Global South diplomacy from several angles, addressing in particular China's diplomatic initiatives, bilateral partnership diplomacy, and multilateral diplomacy. Section 3 analyzes the formation of China's Global South diplomacy by tracing its immediate origins in the foreign policy debates around 2013, the new diplomatic initiatives that followed, and their subsequent evolution. Section 4 analyzes what features China's Global South diplomacy displays when viewed as alignment behavior. It does so from three perspectives: historical continuity, the theoretical positioning of this diplomacy as a strategy toward the United States, and its implications for the analysis of contemporary international relations.

2. The Xi Jinping Administration's Emphasis on Global South Diplomacy

The Xi Jinping administration has been pursuing a diplomacy that prioritizes the Global South. This emphasis is evident in the development of concepts associated with Global South diplomacy, the expansion of partnership diplomacy, and recent trends in multilateral diplomacy.

(1) Global Initiatives

The Xi Jinping administration has put forward four such initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and the Global Governance Initiative (GGI). These China-promoted global initiatives are presented as a “strategic

7) Kawashima Shin, “Chugoku kara mita ‘gurobaru sausu (quanqiu nanfang)’” [The Global South Viewed from China's Perspective], *Anzen Hoshō Kenkyū* [Security Studies] 5, no. 4 (December 2023): 27–40; Liu Jiangwei and Sity Daud, “Trends and Trajectories in ‘Global South’ Research: A Comparative Study of CNKI and WOS Database Publications,” *Frontiers in Political Science*, March 13, 2025.

guidance” for realizing China’s vision of global governance, namely the “community with a shared future for mankind.”

Each is offered as China’s response to a fundamental issue: development, security, ideology, and international order, respectively.

1) The Global Development Initiative (GDI)

The GDI was unveiled in September 2021 and is positioned as a means of supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It sets out six core principles: (1) development as a priority, (2) a people-centered approach, (3) inclusiveness and benefits for all, (4) innovation-driven development, (5) harmony between man and nature, and (6) results-oriented actions.⁸ To advance this initiative, China has established the “Global Development Project Pool,” the “Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund,” and the “China-UN Peace and Development Fund.”

2) The Global Security Initiative (GSI)

The GSI is a concept put forward in April 2022. It criticizes the U.S. alliance network as a small grouping rooted in Cold War-era military alliance thinking, and underscores the need for “comprehensive security.” China has set out “six commitments” as core principles: (1) commitment to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, (2) commitment to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, (3) commitment to abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, (4) commitment to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously, (5) commitment to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, and (6) commitment to maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.⁹ Its strategic objective is to challenge the legitimacy of the U.S. alliance system.

8) “Xi Jinping zai di qishiliu jie Lianheguo dahui yibanxing bianlun shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping’s Speech at the General Debate of the 76th UN General Assembly (full text)], *Xinhua Net*, September 22, 2021, http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2021-09/22/c_11278867524.htm.

9) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Global Security Initiative Concept Paper,” February 21, 2023, http://www.news.cn/world/2023-02/21/c_1129382628.htm.

3) The Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)

Announced in March 2023, the GCI is a concept that challenges the notion of universal human rights and instead promotes the flexible application of diverse “common values.” Its basic principles are: (1) respect for the diversity of civilizations, (2) advocacy for the common values of humanity, (3) emphasis on the importance of inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and (4) strengthening international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation.¹⁰ Its principal ideological aim is to displace the concept of “universal values” (which China criticizes as bound up with liberal democracy and human rights) with that of “common values of humanity” (peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom). Within this framework, the meanings of terms such as “democracy” and “freedom” are relativized and held to be properly defined within the distinctive context of each civilization.

4) The Global Governance Initiative (GGI)

President Xi Jinping unveiled the GGI at the SCO Plus Summit in September 2025. It is presented as a culminating initiative that provides an institutional roadmap for the new world order envisioned by the other three initiatives. Underlying it is the assessment that the current global governance system stands at a new crossroads, suffers from a “governance deficit,” and fails to reflect the rise of the Global South.¹¹ The GGI is built on five principles: (1) commitment to sovereign equality, (2) commitment to international rule of law, (3) commitment to multilateralism, (4) commitment to the people-centered approach, and (5) commitment to real results. At the core of its agenda are the strengthening of the representation and voice of the Global South in global institutions such as the United Nations, the WTO, and international financial institutions, together with the assertion of a strict interpretation of the UN Charter's principles of sovereignty and non-

10) [China] State Council, “Xi Jinping zai Zhongguo Gongchandang yu shijie zhengdang gaoceng duihuaui shang de zhuzhi jianghua (quanwen)” [Keynote Speech by Xi Jinping at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting (full text)], March 15, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2023-03/15/content_5746950.htm.

11) “Cong xitong he quanyu bawo jianxing quanqiu zhili changyi” [Implementing the Global Governance Initiative through a Systemic and Comprehensive Approach], *People's Daily*, October 10, 2025.

interference in internal affairs.¹² Through this initiative, China appears to be pursuing the aim of advancing the transformation of the international order under its own leadership.

(2) The Global Expansion of Partnership Diplomacy

China has pursued partnership diplomacy since the 1990s. Centered on strategic partnerships, this approach has sought to build sustained and broad-based friendly relations with other countries that fall short of formal alliances. Through the 2000s, because the focus of Chinese diplomacy lay in great power diplomacy, partnerships were largely formed with great powers and developed countries.

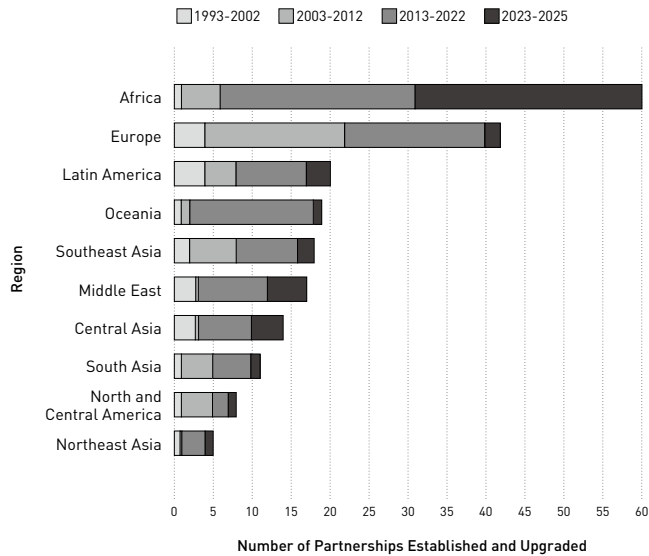
The Xi Jinping administration has extended these partnerships globally, actively expanding them to the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific Island countries. At the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in 2014, President Xi called for “building a global partnership network,” and he has since pushed to strengthen partnership diplomacy. Since the start of the twenty-first century, China has rapidly increased the number of partnership relationships it has concluded. Under the Xi administration, it has extended these to Africa, the Middle East, and Oceania while also systematizing them.¹³

A particularly notable feature is that partnerships, previously confined to great powers and neighboring states, have now been expanded globally. As Figure 1 shows, this has been especially pronounced in the building of relationships with Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania.

12) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Global Governance Initiative Concept Paper,” September 1, 2025.

13) Li Boyi, “Zhongguo huoban waijiao de bianhua” [Changes in China’s Partnership Diplomacy], *Zhanlue Juece Yanjiu* [Journal of Strategy and Decision-making], no. 3 (2021): 36-66.

Figure 1. Number of Partnerships Established and Upgraded by China, by Region and Period



(Source) Author’s illustration based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China website.

(3) Prioritizing the Global South in Multilateral Diplomacy: The Expansion of BRICS Plus and the SCO

Third, in China’s multilateral diplomacy, one can observe a tendency toward institutional expansion together with an emphasis on the Global South. What follows considers the expansion of BRICS and the SCO, the two organizations that lie at the heart of China’s multilateral diplomacy.

1) Promoting BRICS Expansion

Founded in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, and China, BRICS was joined by South Africa in 2011. In 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates were admitted as members, followed by Indonesia in 2025. A separate category of partner countries now includes Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Nigeria, and Vietnam, among others.

It was China that actively advocated this BRICS expansion. China put forward the “BRICS Plus” formula in 2017, and the proposal subsequently gained traction. China’s role in the 2023 round of BRICS expansion was particularly significant.¹⁴ China strongly supported the admission of new members such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, with the aim of enhancing BRICS’s international standing and influence.

China’s principal motive for promoting BRICS expansion lies in its emphasis on the Global South and its determination to exert leadership there. Beijing regards BRICS as a valuable and singular mechanism for engaging with the Global South. In July 2023, ahead of the BRICS Summit, China’s top diplomat, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, described BRICS as “the most important platform for cooperation among emerging markets and developing countries.”¹⁵

BRICS provides China with a useful venue for portraying itself as a champion of the developing world. President Xi underscored this role in his speech at the 2023 BRICS Summit, declaring: “China has always shared the same breath and destiny with the developing countries... and will forever be a member of the developing countries.”¹⁶ China positions BRICS as an important platform for South-South cooperation and seeks, through its expansion, to give the voices of Global South countries greater weight on the international stage. A commentary from the state news agency Xinhua observed: “The expanded BRICS has now grown into the ‘front line’ of the Global South. Within the great currents of history, an ever-greater number of developing countries are moving from political awakening and economic development toward global solidarity, gradually converging on the Global

14) Emmanuel Frimpong Sarpong and Hagan Sibiri, “Building a Bloc from BRICS: Assessing China’s Strategic Interests and Influence,” Africa Policy Research Institute, December 19, 2024, <https://afripoli.org/building-a-bloc-from-brics-assessing-chinas-strategic-interests-and-influence>.

15) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Wang Yi huijian Jinzhuang andaihui Nanfei qiantouren, Nanfei zongtongfu buzhang Entshaweini” [Wang Yi Meets with the South African Coordinator of the BRICS National Security Advisers Meeting, South African Minister in the Presidency Ntshavheni], July 26, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202307/t20230726_11117821.shtml.

16) “Xi Jinping zai ‘Jinzhuang+’ lingdaoren duihuahui shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping’s Address at the ‘BRICS Plus’ Leaders’ Dialogue (full text)], *Xinhua*, August 24, 2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202308/content_6899939.htm.

South as a major force driving change in the international order.”¹⁷

For many small and medium-sized developing countries, the BRICS vision of a more democratic and equitable multipolar world order is attractive, and many states have signaled an interest in joining. By championing the “BRICS Plus” model and expanding cooperation between BRICS members and non-members, China appears to be seeking to consolidate its own leadership within the Global South.¹⁸ In this sense, BRICS expansion is a strategic move for China to push back against the Western-led international order and to construct a more multipolar world order. Drawing into BRICS resource-rich states that find themselves uneasy with a Western-centered order represents the concrete expression of that strategy.¹⁹

2) The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in 2001 on the foundation of the Shanghai Five, was set up with counterterrorism as its central purpose, comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

With the accession of India and Pakistan in 2017, the SCO's character shifted from a Central Asia-centered grouping to a more pan-Eurasian organization.²⁰ Li Xiaotian argues that the SCO upholds a sovereignty norm centered on “non-interference in internal affairs” and is following a “statist” developmental trajectory. This stance gives clear expression to the principles of respect for sovereignty and non-interference that many developing countries prioritize, and distinguishes it from older forms of regionalism (such as the EU) that aspire to Western-centric democratic norms and

17) “Nanfang chao qi zheng yangfan: Jiema jinzhuan hezuo xingwen zhiyuan de chenggong zhi dao” [The South Rises and Sets Sail: Decoding How BRICS Cooperation Has Achieved Steady, Far-Reaching Success], *Xinhua*, October 26, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202410/content_6982958.htm.

18) Wen Wang and Chen Long, “A New Era of ‘Greater BRICS Cooperation’: The Future of the World and China’s Role,” *BRICS Journal of Economics* 5, no. 4 (2024): 37-54.

19) Marcin Przychodniak, “China Building Up BRICS as Important Foreign Policy Tool,” PISM Bulletin, February 28, 2025, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/china-building-up-brics-as-important-foreign-policy-tool>; Brice Tseen Fu Lee and Juan Pablo Sims, “Legitimacy Through Diversity: China’s Leadership in the BRICS Plus Expansion for Global Balance,” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (May 2024).

20) Li Ziguo, “Shanghai hezuo zuzhi de kuoyuan yu mingyun gongtongti jianshe” [The Expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Construction of a Community with a Shared Future], *E Luosi Dong Ou Zhong Ya yanjiu*, no. 4 (2021): 7-28.

supranational governance institutions.²¹

Iran joined in 2023, and Belarus followed in 2024. Iran's accession dramatically expanded the SCO's cooperative space and geopolitical reach, extending its footprint to West Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea.²²

The SCO has institutional categories for observer states and dialogue partners. Observer states have included Mongolia (2004); India, Pakistan, and Iran (2005); Afghanistan (2012); and Belarus (2015). All but Mongolia and Afghanistan have since become full members. The dialogue partner category, established as a preliminary stage toward observer or full member status, has included Sri Lanka and Belarus (2009); Turkey (2012); Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, and Armenia (2015); Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia (2021); Kuwait, the Maldives, Myanmar, the UAE, and Bahrain (2023); and Laos (2025).

Now stretching across the Eurasian continent, the SCO has become an important framework in the context of Global South diplomacy. As noted above, the venue for the launch of the Global Governance Initiative was an SCO Plus meeting. Admittedly, the entry of India and Pakistan has substantially reduced the likelihood that the SCO will act in unison. Even so, the SCO's importance as an organization centered outside the United States and Europe is likely to continue growing.

3. The Formation of China's Global South Strategy

(1) Strategic Debates, 2012–2015

1) Shifting Great Power Relations

China's growing emphasis not only on great power relations but also on diplomacy with the developing world appears to have been triggered by changes in great power relations themselves. Specifically, the deterioration of China's security environment and the strategic debates it prompted gave rise to an impulse to give greater weight to diplomacy with countries on China's periphery and beyond.

From Xi Jinping's elevation to the post of CPC General Secretary

21) Li Xiaotian, "Shanghai hezuo zuzhi kuoyuan hou de diqu dingwei yu hezuo geju" [The Regional Positioning and Cooperation Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization after Expansion], *Guoji zhanwang*, no. 3 (2021): 96–118.

22) Guo Manruo, "Yilang jiaru Shanghe zuzhi: Zuoyongli, yingxiang ji tiaozhan" [Iran's Accession to the SCO: Impact, Influence, and Challenges], International Cooperation Center, May 16, 2023, <https://www.icc.org.cn/trends/mediareports/1679.html>.

through 2014, China's external relations in the Asia-Pacific deteriorated. In response to the Japanese government's purchase of the Senkaku Islands in 2012, China began routinely dispatching government vessels to the area. In 2013 it declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea and stepped up People's Liberation Army (PLA) activities. Sino-Japanese relations sank to what could be called their worst state since the normalization of diplomatic ties.²³ China's activities in the South China Sea also turned more assertive, and its relations with the Philippines and Vietnam deteriorated. The Barack Obama administration in the United States announced its "rebalance" to Asia and adopted a more Asia-focused stance, but its central thrust was to strengthen the U.S. presence in order to balance against China's rise and Beijing's increasingly coercive policies toward its neighbors.²⁴

With respect to the relationship with the United States, President Xi Jinping believed that decisive confrontation could be avoided by constructing what he termed a "new type of great power relations" between the United States and China. The "new type of great power relations" rests on three principles: (1) avoiding conflict, (2) respecting each other's core interests, and (3) building a win-win relationship. The concept aimed to prevent confrontation and build a stable relationship through compromise between the United States and China.²⁵ However, China's definition of "core interests" encompassed claims regarding its political system and territorial issues, and was not acceptable to the United States.

In this way, China's adoption of more assertive policies, primarily in the maritime domain, expanded friction with neighboring countries and the United States, and its security environment was steadily worsening.

23) Yamaguchi Shinji, "Japan's Encounters with China at Sea: The 2013 Fire-Control Radar Incident and Japan's China Strategy," in *Encounters and Escalation in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives on China's Military and Implications for Regional Security*, ed. Oriana Skylar Mastro, NBR Special Report no. 108 (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2024).

24) Mori Satoru, "Obama seiken no ribaransu to taichu seisaku" [The Obama Administration's Rebalance and China Policy], *Kokusai Anzenhoshō* [Journal of International Security] 41, no. 3 (2013): 29-45.

25) Kawashima Shin, "Kiro ni tatsu Shu Kinpei seiken no taigai seisaku rinen: Shingata taikoku kankēi to shingata kokusai kankēi" [Foreign Policy Ideology of the Xi Jinping Administration at a Crossroads: The New Type of Great Power Relations and the New Type of International Relations], *Chugoku Kenkyū Geppo* [Monthly journal of Chinese affairs] 74, no. 9 (September 2020): 18-25; Masuda Masayuki, "Pawa toranjishon ron to Chugoku no taibei seisaku: 'Shingata taikoku kankēi' ron no jutēn iko" [Power Transition Theory and China's Policy toward the United States: A Shift of Emphasis in the 'New Type of Great Power Relations' Discourse], *Kanagawa daigaku ajia rebyū*, no. 2 (2015): 70-80.

2) Debates over the Direction of Foreign Strategy

Amid these growing frictions and the deepening tensions with the United States, a debate emerged over the direction of China's foreign strategy.

The first concerned the necessity of alliances.²⁶

Those who saw alliances as necessary argued that, in light of changes in international relations, the non-alignment policy should be revised. As rivalry with the United States deepened and China's own power grew, they argued, there was no longer any need to remain reluctant to enter into alliances.²⁷

According to Zhang Weiwei, an associate professor at Northeast Normal University, in a situation of deepening competition with the United States and confrontation with a powerful adversary, securing reliable allies would yield additional security resources. Moreover, China's current cautious foreign policy could not serve as the policy line once China's rise was complete. In particular, alliances would become necessary as China sought more actively to build an international order favorable to itself.²⁸

Those who argued for preserving the non-alignment policy, by contrast, emphasized that alliances were not a rational choice for China. Ling Shengli, a professor at China Foreign Affairs University, argued that entering into an extremely competitive relationship with the United States and others at the present stage would not serve China's interests. In his view, if China were

26) On debates over alliances, see Lim Jaehwan, "Chugoku no shin domei ron: Anzen hoshō chitsujō no aratana seido senryaku" [China's New Alliance Theory: A New Institutional Strategy for the Security Order], in *Reisengo no Higashi Ajia chitsujō: Chitsujō keisei o meguru kakkoku no koso* [The Post-Cold War East Asian Order: National Visions for the Construction of Order], ed. Sahashi Ryo (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 2020), 255-272; Dong Yibing, "Zhongguo 'huoban guanxi zhanlüe' de gainian bianxi, jianli yuanyin ji qi xuejie taidu" [Conceptual Analysis of China's "Partnership Strategy," Its Origins, and Academic Attitudes toward It], *Jiangnan shehui xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Jiangnan Social University] 21, no. 3 (September 2021): 63-66.

27) For arguments calling for alliances or quasi-alliances, see Yan Xuetong, "Eluosi kekao ma?" [Is Russia Reliable?], *Guoji jingji pinglun* [International Economic Review], no. 3 (2012): 21-25; Sun Degang, "Lun xinshiqi Zhongguo de zhun lianmeng wajiao" [On China's Quasi-Alliance Diplomacy in the New Era], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], no. 3 (2012): 57-81.

28) Zhang Weiwei and Zheng Yue, "Chongxin lijie bu jiemeng: Zhongguo wajiao zhanlüe tiaozheng de yizhong kenengxing" [Rethinking Non-Alignment: One Possibility for Adjusting China's Diplomatic Strategy], *Liaoning daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* [Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)] 49, no. 2 (March 2021): 147-155.

to abandon partnership diplomacy in favor of alliances, military-centered security competition would intensify and a confrontational pattern of international relations would take shape.²⁹

Ling underscored that partnerships are clearly distinct from military alliances. Specifically, (1) the principal aim of partnerships is not to strengthen security cooperation; (2) partnerships are a global trend rather than a Chinese-specific concept; (3) security cooperation with partners centers on military exchanges and mutual trust-building, and does not extend to substantive institutions or plans for military cooperation; and (4) while it is not impossible for partnerships to evolve into alliances, such evolution depends on many conditions.

The second debate concerned strategic direction.

Wang Jisi, a professor at Peking University's School of International Studies, advanced a "*Xijin*" (March Westward) approach in 2012.³⁰ He argued that China's strategic orientation should emphasize a westward push. At the time, amid maritime disputes off China's eastern seaboard involving the United States, the thrust of Wang's argument was that emphasizing political and economic activities to the west would enable China to advance its interests while avoiding direct U.S.-China confrontation. Wang's argument attracted broad attention. It proposed that, while continuing to face off with the United States in the eastern maritime arena, China should avoid direct collision and seek developmental space to the west.

In response, Major General Yang Yi of the Academy of Military Sciences put forward an argument on strategic direction encapsulated in the slogan "*Gu Bei, Wen Xi, An Dong, Tuo Nan*" (Consolidate the North, Stabilize the West, Calm the East, and Open Up the South). While agreeing with Wang's basic premises, Yang held that China need not focus solely on the west: in the north it should consolidate its position through partnership with Russia; in the west it should prioritize stability with the SCO at the core; in the east it should resist U.S. pressure while seeking a breakthrough into the Pacific; and in the south it should pursue new frontiers in Southeast Asia and India.³¹ Wang's argument thus stimulated a wider debate on China's strategic direction.

29) Ling Shengli, "Zhongguo weishenme bu jiemeng?" [Why Does China Not Form Alliances?], *Waijiao pinglun* [Foreign Affairs Review], no. 3 (2013): 20-33.

30) Wang Jisi, "'Xijin,' Zhongguo diyuan zhanlüe de zai pingheng" ["Marching West": A Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy], *Global Times*, October 17, 2012.

31) Yang Yi, "Zhoubian anquan xuyao quanfangwei zhanlüe" [Peripheral security requires an omnidirectional strategy], *Global Times*, October 26, 2012.

Many Chinese scholarly works have noted that Wang's "march westward" thesis served as a precursor to the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the "Silk Road Economic Belt."³² However, the policies that China actually pursued thereafter, while drawing on the ideas of the "march westward" school, took the form of a more global, omnidirectional pursuit of expansion.

In sum, Chinese foreign policy was beginning to explore new approaches with the changing security situation in Asia in mind.

3) New Diplomatic Initiatives

From 2013 onward, China rolled out a series of new diplomatic initiatives in rapid succession. These policies and statements were not a set of one-off measures but a coordinated strategic effort that would form the foundation of China's later Global South policy. Together they signaled that, across three dimensions (economic, diplomatic-ideational, and security-related), China was beginning to envision a new regional order centered on itself.

The first was the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative. In September 2013, in a speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, President Xi proposed the joint construction of a "Silk Road Economic Belt." Drawing on what he described as the ancient Silk Road's spirit of peace, friendship, openness, and inclusiveness, Xi called for deepening economic cooperation across the Eurasian continent through the "*Wu Tong*" (Five Connectivities): policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people connectivity.³³ The following month, in October, he unveiled the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" initiative in Indonesia. Combined as the "Belt and Road Initiative," these two concepts went beyond seeking outlets abroad for China's excess industrial capacity. They were tied to a geopolitical intent to enhance Eurasian connectivity and to build a vast economic sphere with

32) Zhao Huasheng, "'Sichou zhi lu jingji dai' de guanzhu dian ji qieru dian" [Focus Points and Entry Points of the "Silk Road Economic Belt"], *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* [Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Edition of Philosophy and Social Sciences)] 35, no. 3 (June 2014): 27-35; Zhao Lei et al., "'Yidai yilu' xuyao 'yuan lilun'" [The "Belt and Road" Needs an "Original Theory"], Belt and Road One Hundred Forum, December 7, 2018, https://aoc.ouc.edu.cn/_t719/2018/1207/c9821a230061/page.psp.

33) [China] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Xi Jinping zai Nazha'erbayefu daxue de yanjiang (quanwen)" [Xi Jinping's Speech at Nazarbayev University (full text)], September 8, 2013, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/ywzt_675099/2013nzt_675233/xjpfcyghy_675259/zxxx_675261/201309/t20130908_9283228.shtml.

China as its hub.

The second was the convening of the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference. On October 24-25, 2013, the first work conference in Chinese history dedicated to “peripheral diplomacy” was held. At this conference, President Xi put forward the principles of “*Qin, Cheng, Hui, Rong*” (Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness) as the basic guidelines for relationship-building with neighboring countries. This approach emphasized that China's development would benefit neighboring states and sought to deepen friendly relations through economic appeal. The conference symbolized China's shift toward an active posture, prioritizing diplomacy with its surrounding region and seeking to construct a stable security environment by its own efforts. Xi declared that China would “vigorously advance peripheral diplomacy and strive to secure a favorable surrounding environment for our country,” signaling the deployment of more assertive foreign policy.³⁴

The third was the articulation of a new security concept. In May 2014, at the summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) held in Shanghai, President Xi delivered a keynote speech proposing a “New Asian Security Concept” built on the four pillars of “common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable” security. At its core was the assertion that “Asian affairs should be handled by the Asian people, and Asian security should be safeguarded by the Asian people.”³⁵ This implicitly criticized U.S.-led bilateral military alliances as “relics of the Cold War” and signaled a clear intent to push U.S. influence out of the Asian security order and construct a new framework centered on dialogue and cooperation among Asian states.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the global expansion of partnerships was indicated at the November 2014 Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference. Chinese foreign policy was thus beginning to alter its approach.

34) “Xi Jinping zai zhoubian waijiao gongzuo zuotanhui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua” [Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference], *Xinhua Net*, October 25, 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm.

35) “Xi Jinping zai Yazhou xianghu xiezuo yu xinren cuoshi huiyi disi ci fenghui shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping's Speech at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (full text)], *People's Daily*, May 22, 2014.

(2) Great Power Rivalry and the Global South, 2017–2022

It was in 2017 that China's diplomacy with the developing world received another major boost. That year saw the inauguration of the Donald Trump administration. Concerns about U.S. global leadership grew, and China perceived an expansion of opportunities for itself. Within China, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) consolidated General Secretary Xi Jinping's dominant position, enabling more vigorous pursuit of his policy agenda.

The Trump administration, which took office in January 2017, withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), adopted a skeptical stance toward international institutions, and moved to reexamine relations with allies, signaling a retreat from the role the United States had traditionally played as leader of the international order.

China saw this as an opportunity to position itself as a defender of globalization and multilateralism and to extend its influence in the international community. In his speeches at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017 and at the UN headquarters in Geneva, President Xi called for the building of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” opposed protectionism, and forcefully presented himself as a defender of an open world economy.³⁶ In May of the same year, the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing, with more than 140 countries (including 29 heads of state) and over 80 international organizations participating.

Domestically, the 19th National Congress of the CPC, held in October 2017, both consolidated the Xi regime and unveiled a more ambitious foreign policy agenda.³⁷ In his speech, General Secretary Xi noted that “the world is undergoing major developments, transformation, and adjustment,” and made clear that “the trends of global multi-polarity, economic globalization, IT application, and cultural diversity are surging forward.” By “global multi-polarity” Xi meant a shift in the global balance of power and a weakening of the U.S.-dominated unipolar system. Within these shifts in the balance

36) Xi Jinping, “Gong dan shidai zeren, gong cu quanqiu fazhan” [Sharing the Responsibilities of Our Times, Jointly Promoting Global Development], *Qiushi Net*, December 15, 2020.

37) On the 19th National Congress of the CPC, see Yamaguchi Shinji, “Chugoku Kyosanto dai-19-kai zenkoku daihyo taikai no kisoteki bunseki: 3 Chugoku no tokushoku aru taikoku gaiko” [Basic Analysis of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: (3) Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics], *NIDS Commentary*, November 13, 2017.

of power, he observed that “changes in the global governance system and the international order are speeding up; countries are becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent; [and] relative international forces are becoming more balanced.” Against this backdrop, Xi emphasized that “China follows the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration in engaging in global governance,” and “stands for democracy in international relations.” Furthermore, he underscored that “China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country, [and] take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system.”³⁸

At the September 2017 BRICS Summit, President Xi proposed a new cooperation model under the rubric of “BRICS Plus.” At its core was the deepening of dialogue and cooperation with emerging-market and developing countries, the promotion of South-South cooperation, and the construction of broader partnerships through the “BRICS Plus” framework.³⁹

The move toward the BRICS Plus concept had been clearly signaled from early 2017. On March 9, 2017, at the Fifth Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress, Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared: “In terms of South-South cooperation, we will explore the modality of ‘BRICS Plus.’ By holding outreach dialogues with other major developing countries and organizations of developing countries, we hope to establish a more extensive partnership, widen the BRICS’ circle of friends and turn the BRICS into the most impactful platform for South-South cooperation.” His statement made plain China's intent to enlarge its international influence through the expansion of BRICS. The remarks reveal a Chinese strategy aimed at evolving BRICS beyond a mere economic cooperation framework into an actor exerting broader influence in international politics.⁴⁰

38) [China] State Council, “Xi Jinping: Juesheng quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui, duoqu xinshidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi weida shengli: Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang dishijiu ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao” [Xi Jinping: Securing a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Achieving the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China], October 27, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

39) “Xi Jinping Jinzhuan guojia lingdaoren Xiamen huiwu jizhehui shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping's Speech at the Press Conference of the BRICS Leaders' Xiamen Summit (full text)], *Xinhua*, September 5, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-09/05/content_5222821.htm.

40) “Wang Yi: Yao tansuo ‘Jinzhuan+’ moshi, kuoda Jinzhuan guojia ‘pengyou quan’” [Wang Yi: We Should Explore the ‘BRICS Plus’ Model and Expand the BRICS Countries’ ‘Circle of Friends’], *People's Daily Online*, March 9, 2017, <http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2017/n1/2017/0309/c410899-29132933.html>.

In 2018, the Trump administration imposed large-scale additional tariffs on China, and the U.S.-China trade war began in earnest. As U.S.-China rivalry hardened, China continued to strengthen its ties with emerging and developing economies. The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020, dealt a severe blow to the global economy, but China sought to use the moment to expand its influence. Having achieved success in containing the virus domestically in the early stages of the pandemic, and as the United States and others turned inward, China actively supplied masks, medical equipment, and later vaccines to developing countries in what came to be known as its “vaccine diplomacy.” The aim was to improve China’s image and strengthen its relationships, particularly in the developing world.⁴¹ In his September 2021 address to the UN General Assembly, President Xi pledged free vaccine provisions to developing countries and contributions to the “COVAX Facility,” presenting China as a leader in the global public health crisis.⁴²

(3) Global Upheaval and Global South Diplomacy, 2022 Onward

The Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in February 2022, served as a fresh catalyst. While the United States, Europe, and Japan ramped up their condemnation of Russia and tightened economic sanctions, China took a markedly different line, deploying a diplomacy aimed at peeling Global South countries away from the United States.

A look at Chinese diplomacy in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine reveals an intensification of activity directed at the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. From late March, after the Russian invasion, Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a tour of Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Nepal, and also chaired the Third Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan in Tunxi, Anhui Province.

At a joint press conference with Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra, Wang stated: “I have exchanged views with many foreign ministers of Asian and African countries. I feel that many countries, like China, are following closely the developments of the Ukraine crisis, and share a lot of common language.” His remarks highlighted the convergence

41) Ian Tsung-yen Chen, “The Crisis of COVID-19 and the Political Economy of China’s Vaccine Diplomacy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 3 (July 2022).

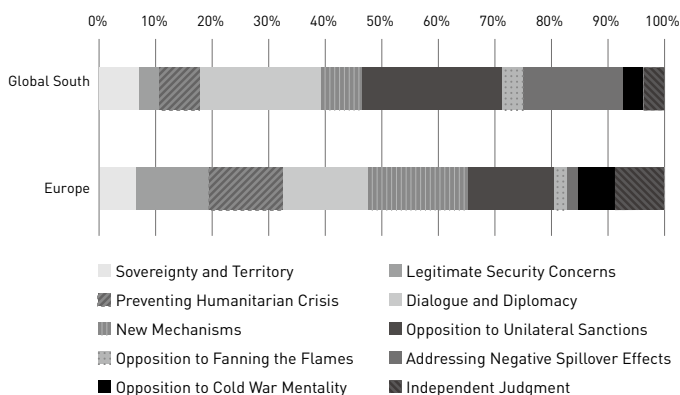
42) [China] State Council, “Xi Jinping zai di qishiliu jie Lianheguo dahui yibanxing bianlun shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping’s Speech at the General Debate of the 76th UN General Assembly (full text)], September 22, 2021, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-09/22/content_5638597.htm.

of views between Asian and African states and China.

As shown in Figure 2, China has emphasized to emerging economies its preference for a peaceful resolution, its opposition to sanctions, and its rejection of any spillover of the Ukraine situation into other regions.⁴³ This appears to be an effort to identify as much common ground as possible with countries unwilling to side with either the West or Russia, and to enlarge the ranks of the neutral. By creating the impression that the entire world has not united in condemning Russia, China can also be seen as indirectly supporting Russia's position.

Most importantly, the points China emphasized in its diplomacy following the war's outbreak directly prefigured the Global Security Initiative. Several principles later embedded in the GSI were already in evidence in Chinese diplomacy at this time: commitment to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; commitment to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; commitment to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; and commitment to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation.

Figure 2. Frequency of Mentions in Foreign Ministerial Meetings: Comparison Between the Global South and Europe (February 24–April 6, 2022)



(Source) Author's illustration based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website.

43) Yamaguchi Shinji, "Chugoku to Roshia Ukuraina senso: Chu-Ro tai-Bei teikei no shinka to genkai" [China and the Russia-Ukraine War: The Deepening and Limitation of China-Russia Cooperation against the United States], *NIDS Commentary*, May 12, 2022.

Underlying these arguments was the Chinese leadership's framing of the international situation as "great changes unseen in a century."⁴⁴ This view rests on several major global trends. First, the rapid rise of China and other emerging economies has produced a shift in the balance of power captured in the phrase "the East is rising and the West is declining." Second, U.S. hegemony has experienced a relative decline. Third, the international system as a whole has entered a period of restructuring. Unlike the sharply defined bipolar structure of the Cold War, the present moment combines U.S.-China rivalry between two great powers with a broader trend toward multipolarity.⁴⁵ China's central aim is to further accelerate the dismantling of U.S. hegemony by strengthening its alignment with the Global South.

4. Analysis of China's Alignment Behavior

How, then, should China's Global South policy be situated within a broader perspective? This section explores its position in historical context, its role as a strategy toward the United States, and the influence it exerts on contemporary international relations.

(1) Historical Context

Contemporary China's Global South diplomacy is not an entirely new policy that began under Xi Jinping. Its intellectual lineage can be traced back to the Mao Zedong era. At that time, China placed solidarity with what would today be called the Global South at the heart of its diplomacy and sought to exercise ideological influence.

During the Mao era, China advanced the "theory of intermediate zones," which emphasized the importance of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The theory held that between the two great blocs of the United States and the Soviet Union lay a vast array of countries that constituted the principal battleground of struggle. By fomenting revolution in this intermediate zone, China sought to advance a worldwide struggle and prevail in the Cold War.⁴⁶ The theory's significance lay in its emphasis on the importance of the

44) Doshi, *Long Game*, 358-366.

45) "Yi jianqiang zhanlue dingli yingdui bainian wei you zhi da bianju" [Responding to the Great Changes Unseen in a Century with Firm Strategic Resolve], *Zhongguo Jijian Jiancha Bao* [China Discipline Inspection and Supervision News], February 18, 2021.

46) Uno Shigeaki, *Chugoku to kokusai kankei* [China and International Relations] (Kyoto: Koyo Shobo, 1981), 75-85.

countries in the middle within U.S.-Soviet great power competition.

As the Sino-Soviet split deepened, the theory was further developed and systematized as the “Three Worlds” theory, which Deng Xiaoping officially articulated in a UN speech in 1974. The theory categorized the world into three parts: the United States and the Soviet Union, the superpowers contending for hegemony, were placed in the “First World”; the developed countries such as Japan and Western Europe formed the “Second World”; and the broad swath of developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America made up the “Third World.”⁴⁷

Within this framework, China positioned itself as a member of the “Third World” and its natural leader. Although China was then economically poor and internationally isolated, it argued that for that very reason it represented the majority of the oppressed world and possessed the moral legitimacy to oppose superpower hegemonism. Symbolic aid projects such as the construction of the TAZARA Railway linking Tanzania and Zambia, along with support for African national liberation movements, gave concrete form to this theory.

With the advent of the Deng Xiaoping era, this ideologically charged diplomacy receded into the background. From the 1990s onward, Deng, who placed reform and opening-up at the top of the agenda, prioritized cooperation with the major powers and concentrated on domestic economic development under the policy of “*Taoguang yanghui*” (Keeping a Low Profile). Relations with the developing world shifted from ideological solidarity toward more practical economic cooperation.

This line was largely maintained under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, with South-South cooperation pursued primarily through the lens of mutual economic benefit. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000, is emblematic of this approach. FOCAC was the first major multilateral forum that China established outside its immediate region, and it represented a pathbreaking effort to institutionalize relations with Africa around economic cooperation.⁴⁸ During this period, however, although China's diplomacy with the developing world was framed as “the foundation of (Chinese diplomacy),” its priority was placed below that of great power diplomacy.⁴⁹

Seen in this light, the Xi Jinping administration's Global South

47) Uno, *Chugoku to kokusai kankei*, 307-318.

48) Daniel Large, *China and Africa: The New Era* (Oxford: Polity, 2021).

49) Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*, 56-58.

diplomacy can be understood as something of a return to earlier roots. Along the axis of U.S.-China rivalry and confrontation, there exists an intermediate zone that adheres fully to neither side and adopts a neutral stance. Contemporary Chinese commentators sometimes refer to this as the “new-type intermediate zone.” Amid intensifying U.S.-China competition, the “new-type intermediate zone” is regarded not as a mere buffer but as the principal battleground where each side’s conceptions collide and compete for influence.⁵⁰ Which side wins the support of the Global South and draws it into its own supply chains and frameworks of international cooperation, the argument runs, will carry political-economic significance decisive for the outcome of the competition.⁵¹

(2) As a Strategy Toward the United States

Amid the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China, what character does China’s Global South diplomacy take on as a strategy directed at the United States?

Although elements of hard balancing, such as the buildup of military power and deepening ties with Russia and others, have grown in China’s strategy toward the United States, that strategy does not rely entirely on these elements. China is deepening its ties with Russia, but the two countries do not stand in a formal alliance; and while military modernization is proceeding rapidly, it will still be some time before China can stand on a par with the United States.

Instead, through partnership diplomacy with Global South countries and through the expansion of BRICS and the SCO, China is building, outside the U.S.-led international political-economic order, a parallel framework of cooperation in which it holds the initiative. By offering Global South countries alternatives to U.S.-led institutions and by speaking on their behalf, these arrangements serve to erode the legitimacy of the existing order from within.⁵²

As Rush Doshi has argued, China’s grand strategy has moved from a

50) “Zhong-Mei ‘yidai yilu’ jingzheng beihou de ‘zhongjian didai’ jiaoli” [The “Intermediate Zone” Contest Behind the U.S.-China “Belt and Road” Competition], *China Daily* (Chinese), September 25, 2024.

51) “Bainian da bianju xia de ‘quanqiu nanfang’” [The “Global South” Amid the Great Changes of a Century], *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 6 (December 2024): 2-26.

52) T. V. Paul, Kai He, and Anders Wivel, “Soft Balancing in the Regions: Causes, Characteristics and Consequences,” *International Affairs* 101, no. 1 (January 2025): 3-15.

phase of “blunting” U.S. power to a phase of “building” an order under its own leadership.⁵³ Global South diplomacy is a core instrument of this “building” phase. It is not merely a reactive countermeasure to the U.S. threat, but a positive foundation for actively constructing a new international order that more fully reflects Chinese values and interests. By drawing Global South countries in economically and deepening political alignment with them, China is consolidating its international base of support and cultivating a favorable strategic environment in which to challenge U.S. hegemony. China's Global South diplomacy can accordingly be situated as a long-term, comprehensive “hegemony-erosion” strategy. Rather than confronting U.S. hegemony with direct military force, it seeks to wear away over time the alliances and international legitimacy on which that hegemony rests, and to shift toward a new order with China at its center.

In this sense, the strategy toward the United States lies at the heart of China's foreign strategy, and Global South diplomacy can be understood as a policy that, through softer means, contributes to that broader strategy toward the United States. China's alignment behavior, therefore, cannot easily be described as having pluralized. Nor, for China, has there been pluralization of issues.

(3) Bloc Formation and Pluralization

What, then, is the impact of China's Global South diplomacy on international relations? The “Global South” is in reality a heterogeneous grouping of emerging and developing countries, and it is impossible to identify a single response to China's initiatives across this set. Discussing the impact on individual states and the diplomacy of each lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

What is possible here is to identify meaningful patterns from recent multilateral diplomacy. In this regard, the SCO Plus Summit and the military parade marking the 80th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, both held in September 2025, offer one telling case. The SCO Plus Summit was held in Tianjin on August 31 and September 1, 2025. This was followed on September 3 by the military parade in Beijing commemorating the 80th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Because the two events were held back-to-back, many leaders who attended the SCO Plus Summit

53) Doshi, *Long Game*.

also took part in the military parade.

As shown in Figure 3, comparison of the 2025 SCO Plus Summit and the 80th anniversary parade with the 70th anniversary parade in 2015 makes the following points clear.⁵⁴

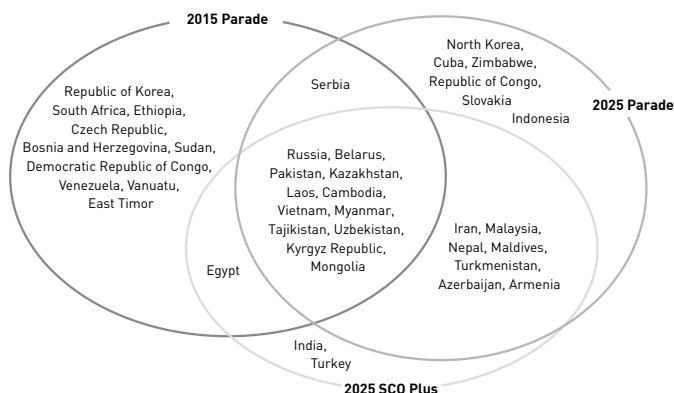
First, a trend toward bloc formation is clearly visible. The 2025 events vividly reflected the deepening of great power rivalry. In contrast to 2015, when China showcased broad international friendship, the 2025 parade was centered on quasi-allies and like-minded states opposing the existing Western-led order. The presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin, North Korean General Secretary Kim Jong Un, and the leaders of Iran and Belarus strongly signals China's intent to make a non-Western coalition visible.

Second, the picture of China extending its influence with the SCO at the core stands out clearly. The consistent or newly added participation of Central Asian states and mainland Southeast Asian countries at both parades suggests that China is steadily expanding its influence across the Eurasian landmass through the Belt and Road Initiative and the SCO.

Third, however, some countries did not conform to that pattern. Egypt, Turkey, and India attended the SCO Plus Summit but were absent from the military parade. Such states profess and practice an autonomous diplomacy. As this suggests, the contemporary configuration of international relations exhibits a pluralistic structure: while great power rivalry centered on U.S.-China confrontation displays tendencies toward bloc formation, the periphery still affords room for regional powers to pursue autonomous diplomacy.

54) Yamaguchi Shinji, "Chugoku no sensho 80 shunen parado ga shimesu kokusai chitsujo no genzaichi: Shinka suru jin'ei tairitsu to tagenka suru sekai" [The State of the International Order Revealed by China's 80th Anniversary Victory Parade: Deepening Bloc Rivalry and a Pluralizing World], *NIDS Commentary*, September 12, 2025.

Figure 3. Attending Heads of State at the 2015 Military Parade, the 2025 SCO Plus Summit, and the 2025 Military Parade



(Source) Author's illustration based on data from various sources.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed China's intensifying Global South diplomacy under Xi Jinping from the perspective of foreign strategy in an age of great power competition. The analysis has made clear that this diplomacy is not a mere assemblage of discrete policies but a calculated, comprehensive strategy aimed at countering U.S. hegemony and reshaping the international order.

First, the chapter has argued that this strategy aims to erode U.S. hegemony through non-military means. Through the construction of alternative international institutions such as the expansion of BRICS and the SCO and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), through the exercise of economic influence via the Belt and Road Initiative, and through the deployment of a flexible partnership diplomacy that contrasts with U.S. military alliances, China is relativizing the U.S.-led international order from within and seeking to construct a parallel order with itself at the center. This represents the concrete practice of what Rush Doshi calls the "building" phase of China's grand strategy: a long-term strategy that erodes the foundations of U.S. hegemony over time.

In this sense, Chinese diplomacy continues to be organized around the relationship with the United States, and Global South diplomacy is positioned to serve that broader strategy. For this reason, Chinese diplomacy

itself has not pluralized.

Second, China's Global South diplomacy is, on the other hand, accelerating the broader trend of pluralization in international politics. China has established itself as a major actor in the Global South and has succeeded in offering many developing countries an important non-Western alternative.

At the same time, while China's ambitious approach has won a degree of support from Global South countries, it has also produced concerns and pushback over issues such as debt, the opacity of projects, and environmental impacts. The countries lumped together as the Global South are by no means monolithic; each has its own national interests and agency. Rather than siding with either the United States or China, many of them practice a shrewd diplomacy that seeks to maximize their own interests by maintaining relations with both. It will not be easy for China simply to peel these countries away from U.S. hegemony, let alone to integrate them into a Sino-centric order.

Contemporary international relations exhibit a composite character: a current of bloc formation organized around U.S.-China rivalry runs alongside a pluralization unfolding in the periphery, and this situation can be expected to continue for some time to come.